

Plot and Counter-Plot

What Happened in the Congo

by Keith Kyle

Moise Tshombe, the former prime minister of the Congo, was hijacked over the Mediterranean on June 30, the very day he had chosen for an operation for the overthrow of his political enemy, Congolese President Joseph-Desire Mobutu. A large sum in cash—around \$200,000—was found afterwards in Palma, Majorca, in the hotel room of Francis Bodenan, the Frenchman the Algerians say carried out the kidnap operation.

Last year, Tshombe returned to voluntary exile in Europe, following the seizure of power by Mobutu in November 1965. Tshombe was not in immediate danger of arrest, but to withdraw abroad was his normal response to a political setback. It brought him closer to his source of finance, the enormous bank account he built up in Switzerland during his period as "Chief of State" of secessionist Katanga. It also brought him in touch with the major European financial interests which saw in him a much more sympathetic ruler of the Congo than Mobutu was rapidly turning out to be.

Tshombe's villa in Madrid had numerous visitors. They included double agents, plausible rogues who would propose elaborate schemes, get a substantial advance from the famous Swiss bank account, then sell the information for another sizable sum to the Congolese government.

Last July a serious attempt was made by white mercenaries in collusion with Ian Smith's regime in Rhodesia to bring off a coup against Mobutu. Mercenary commandos, still employed by the Congolese government now headed by Mobutu, were actively engaged in "pacifying" great tracts of remote country in the east and northeast where left-wing *simba* rebels were at large. At the same time, however, the Mobutu regime was making a sharp political tack to the left. This did not loosen Mobutu's close diplomatic links with the United States, Formosa and Israel, but did involve him in a sharp confrontation with the major Belgian financial interests in the Congo, including the celebrated *Union Miniere* which ran the copper mines in Katanga. The Belgians did not hesitate to spread the word that "communist" influences were coming into the ascendant, and so Tshombe's backers thought conditions

were ripe for the overthrow of the Mobutu regime. This was to be undertaken by the mercenary forces already in the Eastern Congo, with their African allies the former Katangese gendarmes who had been been incorporated into the Congolese National Army (the ANC) at the end of secession.

Colonel Bob Denard, the leading French mercenary, would seize Kisangani (the former Stanleyville); a Belgian, Major Jean Schramme, would take Bukavu. In addition and simultaneously, 70 men would land at the main airports of Lubumbashi (Elisabethville) and Kinshasa (Leopoldville) and capture them with the help of supporters already in those cities. The leaders were to get \$42,000 each. Much of the planning of this operation was done in the Rhodesian capital, Salisbury, where two of Tshombe's top European advisers, Professor René Clemens and Mario Spandre, who had both been expelled from the Congo, the moment Tshombe had been dismissed from the premiership, had taken up residence.

It was, however, at the Rhodesian end that the conspiracy began to fall apart. There was a feud between two of the top English-speaking mercenaries. One officer considered the scheme for seizing the Lubumbashi airport was inviting disaster, because it involved landing 70 unarmed men, out of uniform, from a civilian plane and having them subsequently supplied with weapons. Because of these dissensions—and just possibly because one or two mercenaries had a qualm of conscience about turning on Mobutu while they were still receiving his pay—the conspiracy was disclosed to the Congolese government. Colonel Denard, who was in Kinshasa at the time, was tipped off; he rushed back to his headquarters in Kisangani and cancelled the operation. These fresh instructions did not reach Watsa, in the far northeast, in time to prevent a column of Katangese and mercenaries from marching on Kisangani. The discontent of the Katangese troops was a factor the plotters had taken into account but which was difficult to contain now that the plot had to be unwound. The assassination of the unpopular Congolese Army commander at Kisangani, which was to be the signal to start the mutiny, took place as planned despite Denard's efforts.

In the end the mutiny was put down peacefully—

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tracks sufficiently for the Congolese government to decide to give him the benefit of the doubt and continue to employ him. But the experience convinced Mobutu he must get rid of at least the English-speaking (mainly Rhodesian and South African) mercenaries as soon as possible. This also fitted in with his broader political strategy. He had continued to employ the mercenaries because he needed them for the destruction of the *simba* rebellion and for securing the main frontier posts with Uganda and the Sudan. But the next stage was to enlist the willing help of neighboring countries in sealing off the frontiers from the communist arms traffic which was sustaining the rebels, and this could be done only if the Congolese government impressed Africa as a whole as a genuine nationalist regime.

Backed by the CIA

Mobutu himself has been strongly backed by the Americans, especially the CIA's top Congo expert, Lawrence Devlin, ever since 1960. He had to prove he was not a western stooge. The noisier his quarrel with the Belgians, the more successfully he would be purging himself of this reputation. The other heads of state in Africa were sufficiently impressed by his performance to accept his invitation to stage the September 1967 session of the OAU (Organization of African Unity) annual "summit" at the Congolese capital of Kinshasa. President Mobutu made up his mind that by the time these other African leaders arrived as his guests, he would have cleared the ledger of the Congo's embarrassments. The Katangese copper mines would be firmly in the Congo's own hands. The country's security would be guaranteed. The white mercenaries would have disappeared. And Mobutu determined that another account also would be closed in time for the September deadline: that of Moise Tshombe.

While Tshombe plotted away in his Madrid villa, under the watchful eyes of the CIA, whose reports regularly kept the Mobutu regime on the alert, the Congolese government was deciding to use against him some of his own medicine. The State Department has officially denied Tshombe's allegation before the Algerian Supreme Court that the CIA actually laid on the kidnap plot on Mobutu's behalf. It may well not have done so, since an able and energetic man like Bernardin Mungul-Kiaka, then the Congolese resident minister of state in Brussels, would have been perfectly capable of making the necessary contacts on his own account. The informal American position is that President Mobutu confessed responsibility to the Americans immediately after the hijacking of Tshombe.

Last March the Congolese government put Tshombe on trial (*in absentia*) before a military tribunal, alongside Katangese officers and one civilian held directly responsible for the hijacking.

Since Tshombe was living in Madrid he was invited, through the Spanish government, either to attend trial in person, or send a representative to present his defense. The invitation was ignored. Tshombe was condemned to death. Arrangements were secretly made to ensure that the sentence be executed in Kinshasa. It was originally intended that Tshombe be produced in Kinshasa on June 8. He would be kidnapped and brought through Algiers but there would be no publicity until his arrival in the Congolese capital. A number of agents had been commissioned for the task so that if one scheme failed another could be attempted. Mungul-Kiaka, who had just been appointed secretary-general of President Mobutu's brand-new political party the MPR, was in Algiers in the last days of May to prepare the ground. Only three top Algerians knew of the plot: President Boumedienne, the Minister of Justice and the *Chef de Sureté*. Apparently the Congolese were satisfied that these three would forward the "package" to Kinshasa without publicity or delay.

The first deadline passed because the first version of the plot misfired. The next intention was to unveil Tshombe in Kinshasa on June 30, Congo's Independence Day. In fact it was not until that day that he was seized, over the Mediterranean.

Tshombe's own plotting had by now reached a fairly advanced stage. According to General Mobutu's subsequent statement, Colonel Denard had been to see Tshombe in February, at Madrid. Denard took elaborate steps to conceal the visit, but Mobutu claims to have received news of it (presumably through the CIA). The colonel was stopped at Kinshasa on his way back and closely interrogated, but was finally allowed back to Kisangani.

Probably at this point Mobutu decided to abandon a scheme he had hitherto approved. This was that the large, remote but highly fertile areas in the far east which were hardest to keep pacified were to be settled and administered by carefully selected Europeans who would have a reserve military obligation in case of further trouble from the left-wing rebels. The pilot scheme had been launched by the Belgian ex-planter, Major Jean Schramme, in the Punia/Lobutu area. No doubt reluctantly, since Denard and Schramme seemed to offer the most effective answer to the danger from the left, Mobutu concluded that they themselves constituted an unacceptable security risk from the right. They too would have to go.

Meanwhile Tshombe had become persuaded that Madrid was not a secure place for him. Some of his contacts refused to meet him there for fear of the CIA and, ironically enough, recommended Majorca.

Tshombe appears to have put out the contract for overthrowing Mobutu to competitive tender. There were at least two plans, one of them predominantly Rhodesian/South Af-

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rican. The former concentrated on reestablishing a base for Tshombe in Katanga, the latter on a sharp, quick operation, using 300 men operating in small commandos, to take Kinshasa in one blow.

Tshombe had been to Majorca more than once, to meet those who were putting up schemes, to debate the details, to call for progress on preliminary arrangements, to play one *entrepreneur* off against another. Francis Bodenan, the French ex-convict, appears to have been in the thick of all this plotting. He was certainly an agent of the Congolese government. What is not clear is whether his involvement with Tshombe's schemes was a cover or whether he himself did not decide until the very last moment which side he was going to serve. It is only possible to obtain a one-sided account of the transactions on the critical day, June 30, at Palma, because the other parties are incarcerated in Algeria.

In the morning, apparently, Tshombe indicated clearly that he was going to accept the scheme for a direct attack on Kinshasa. Denard and Schramme would simultaneously take over Kisangani and Bukavu. While the white commandos would be enough to dispose of Mobutu and his leading supporters and secure the key points in the capital, Katangese troops would need to be flown in to provide a sufficient garrison for the city. There was some discussion about terms, the date for the operation and the deposit of cash in advance. Tshombe promised to complete these transactions that evening on his return. He did not return.

Tshombe was kidnapped in midair and arrived, a prisoner, in Algiers. The event, if not the date, would have been no surprise to President Boumedienne. But the circumstances were quite different from those which had been anticipated. In between there had occurred the traumatic experience for the whole Arab world of the crushing six days' defeat at the hands of Israel. The Arab states - and particularly Algeria which was moving to take over the nationalist leadership from Egypt - were casting around for any diplomatic weapon with which to compensate for their military catastrophe. Moreover, the original scheme had provided for Tshombe's secret transfer through Algiers to Kinshasa. What had not been foreseen was that the British co-pilot would be able to get out radio messages stating what was happening and confirming that Tshombe was on board. It was therefore no longer possible to keep Tshombe's presence in Algiers a secret.

It is possible that President Boumedienne had planned all along, ever since first hearing about the matter from Mungul-Kiaka, to exact a high political price from President Mobutu for forwarding his prisoner. It is equally possible that he had intended to cooperate fully with the plot but that the absence of secrecy combined with the excitable atmosphere created by the Middle Eastern war made this impossible.

Whichever was true, there can be no doubt about the toughness of Algerian bargaining in the event. When Mungul-Kiaka was sent to collect the prize, he found that every time he raised the matter the price was increased. In the end Algeria insisted not only on a complete diplomatic and military breach between the Congo and Israel, but also on a total realignment of the Congo's international posture in the UN and elsewhere, and a general amnesty of left-wing politicians like Gbenye, Gizenga, Mulele and Soumialot and the thousands of *simba* guerrillas who took refuge in countries bordering on the Congo.

One need hardly elaborate on the effect which a combination of such a left-wing amnesty and the execution of Moise Tshombe would have on American public opinion. The Johnson Administration would be unable to give further support to the Mobutu regime. A breach with the Israelis would also be no merely symbolic loss: it was in Israel that General Mobutu himself passed out as a paratrooper while he was Chief of Staff of the Congolese National Army, and, both in Israel and the Congo, Israeli instructors have been more effective than those of any other nation in training Congolese officers and troops. It is indeed on his Israeli-trained paracommandos that Mobutu depends.

What the Algerian demands amounted to was that the Congolese president should create an unbridgeable gulf between himself and his two most reliable friends, the United States and Israel. Mobutu was prepared to make some symbolic gestures at the UN as payment on account - he publicly repudiated his UN ambassador for having voted the wrong way on one of the motions on the Arab-Israeli war that was before the General Assembly, and later the Congo appeared in unusual company for one or two such votes. But he was not prepared to go further, all the less so in that, five days after Tshombe's seizure, the mercenaries in the Congo struck in Kisangani and Bukavu more or less according to their part in the plans which Tshombe had been considering. In this emergency, President Mobutu appealed for support from the United States. This came swiftly in the form of a US Strike Command unit of three C130s. It was hardly the moment to choose to offend the Americans.

A Nice Quiet Execution

Americans have long been divided into two camps on the Congo, some believing that only a regime in which Tshombe takes part can bring stability, while others are prepared to go all the way with the "Binza group" (General Mobutu, Justin Bomboko, Victor Nendaka). The US Embassy at Kinshasa, while no doubt forwarding Mobutu private advice not to execute Tshombe, did not give the impression of being unduly put out when that advice was rejected. The

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Americans' main anxiety seemed to be that there should not be a public execution (as there had been of Tshombe's immediate successor as prime minister, Evariste Kimba) and, since Mobutu's own sampling of Congolese public opinion had convinced him that this would be counter-productive, they were fairly confident of carrying their point. But a nice quiet execution in private immediately after Tshombe's delivery from Algiers would not cause much of a stir and would be regretted by few except for some sections of Tshombe's own tribe in Katanga.

The tone, however, changed perceptibly, as it was borne in upon the State Department how serious were the political requirements being laid down by the Algerians. In effect, Mobutu was being told that since he was asking for this favor as between one "revolutionary African" and another, let him start behaving as if he really was a "revolutionary African." Mobutu did not take kindly to this treatment. While on the one hand slapping down anyone like the unfortunate Tanzanian ambassador, who delivered a plea for Tshombe's life, Mobutu made his reaction to political blackmail abundantly clear. In an exclusive interview with (of all people) the *Agence France Presse*, he managed at one and the same time to denounce "international high finance" for its interference in the Congo, and to praise the United States to the skies for having been the one disinterested force in the Congo ever since 1960. Soon afterwards, he made the entire diplomatic corps in Kinshasa turn out to see him invested with the Order of the Auspicious Clouds, by the foreign minister of the Republic of China on behalf of Chiang Kai-shek. And Mobutu appeared for this ceremony wearing his Israeli paratroopers' wings prominently on his uniform.

But President Mobutu's main concern was still with the rapidly approaching September deadline. On September 14, the seventh anniversary of his first coup, when he blocked Patrice Lumumba's struggle to retain power, Mobutu was scheduled to receive his distinguished OAU guests in an entirely new suburb of Kinshasa which had been specially built to accommodate them. Less than 150 miles away is the border with Portuguese Angola, from which any desperate attempt by mercenaries to disrupt the conference would be most likely to come. For weeks and months, wherever ex-Congolese mercenaries gathered together—in Brussels, in London's Earl's Court, in Salisbury, Johannesburg and presumably amongst Schramme's force in Bukavu—fantasies were woven about the theme of a dashing assault on the "OAU precinct" just as the conference was assembling. Perhaps equally damaging to Mobutu, politically, would be an attack, even of a less ambitious kind, just before the conference was due to start, causing heads of state hastily to cancel their reservations.

arrest had caused sufficient confusion among the anti-Mobutu, pro-Tshombe plotters—for example, about who can obtain access to that Swiss bank account—to prevent anything untoward happening in Kinshasa this month. But it would have been unwise to count on it. Mobutu and his backers, including the State Department and the CIA, were having a worrying time.

Nigeria's Civil War

Racial antagonisms afflict the whole southern half of Africa, sections of which are peeling like an onion, tribe from tribe.

Thus Biafra—formerly Eastern Nigeria—seized independence May 30, after a year of partly chosen, partly imposed isolation and on July 7, the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra was invaded by the Nigerian army.

Nigeria is principally big on people—62.5 million of them, increasing by nearly 1.5 million yearly. One black African in four is a Nigerian. Now Nigeria is in the midst of a savage civil war with overtones of genocide.

At the mention of disassembling large political units, bells seem to go off in the American mind. After all, America's own example shows that former colonies can successfully amalgamate. But idealizing on this one example is reaching for a law within the core of an exception. The 13 American colonies were monolingual and monoreligious; more important, they had just been united by the adversity and idealism of war against a common enemy.

The achievement of Turkish, British, French, Portuguese and Belgian colonial rules was to systematize 2,000 African principalities and 5,000 languages into a mere 50 countries and half a dozen language groups. To expect that these artificial entities will all survive the withdrawal of colonial force is unreasonable—nor, apparently, is any reason ever produced why anything more than economic integration is required.

To paraphrase de Gaulle, the goal should now be *l'Afrique des patries*. Scandinavia, Benelux and even EEC work because they are economic, not political, confederations. Africa has tried its hand at unifying sovereignties: limping federations exist between English and French Cameroons, between Tanganyika and Zanzibar and between British Somaliland and Italian Somalia: of these, only the latter has a reasonable chance of survival—because it is monotribal. Mali grouped first four, then three, then two countries, then only one. Guinea-Ghana Union never progressed beyond the stage of a communiqué. The ambitious pan-Africanisms of colonial governors—Nigeria, the

Congo—are not practical.